



Testimony of Steven Zuckerman

Chief Executive Officer, Root Center for Advanced Recovery

RE: H.B. No. 5435 (RAISED) AN ACT ESTABLISHING A TASK FORCE ON SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER SERVICES AND THE EXPENDITURE OF OPIOID LITIGATION SETTLEMENT FUNDS.

H.B. No. 5436 (RAISED) AN ACT CONCERNING LEGISLATIVE OVERSIGHT AND APPROVAL FOR THE EXPENDITURE OF OPIOID LITIGATION SETTLEMENT FUNDS.

Appropriations Committee, March 25, 2022

Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Miner, Representative France and esteemed members of the Appropriations Committee, my name is Steven Zuckerman and I am the Chief Executive Officer of the Root Center for Advanced Recovery.

The Root Center is the largest provider of methadone maintenance treatment services in Connecticut. With ten locations across the state and serving over 5,500 patients daily, the Root Center has undergone expansion in recent years to continue to provide a broader continuum of both addiction and mental health treatment to support the growing opioid epidemic, as well as a burgeoning mental health crisis due to the pandemic.

I am here today to testify in support of the goals of both HB5435 and HB5436 which aim to ensure there is necessary oversight of opioid litigation settlement funds. Specifically, we support ensuring that those dollars go towards opioid treatment and recovery and looks at using some funds for new programs and treatment innovation.

The need for the overall waiver and expansion is evidenced by overdose deaths. Those deaths have increased from 357 to 1,374 between 2012 and 2021. Since COVID was declared a national emergency, there has been a 33% increase in substance use drug overdoses. Although tracking data is not done, Root Center estimates that approximately 300 of its current patients missed an opportunity for residential treatment in the past year.

The Root Center strongly supports the creation of an opioid oversight task force or advisory committee to ensure that the money goes towards substance use disorder abatement infrastructure, programs, services, supports and resources for prevention, treatment, recovery and harm reduction. We would urge you to ensure that any group includes at least one appointment of a methadone maintenance treatment provider. The Root Center, and other methadone maintenance treatment providers, have been on the frontlines throughout the pandemic and are aware of the treatments available and other best practices.

In terms of the Opioid Settlement Fund, it is critically important that these dollars go towards long-term treatment of those who have battled addiction and been impacted by the opioid industry. Investments in the last decade have not kept up with the pace of this unfortunate opioid epidemic.

For instance, in Fiscal Year 2020, there were 127 state-wide substance use intensive residential rehabilitation beds at 102% capacity. The afore-mentioned data does not capture those clients who

were turned away due to no capacity, or when capacity reemerged were no longer in a position of willingness/readiness to accept the treatment, or worst case scenario, which happened more frequently in 2021 than any other year on record, died of an overdose. We expect these numbers to continue to rise as we witness increases in substance abuse during the pandemic. Thus, the need for more residential treatment and a complete continuum of services is necessary.

Root Center will be opening a 16-bed residential treatment facility in the last quarter of FY 23 but have been told by DSS that new providers will not be able to participate in the Medicaid Substance Use Disorder waiver. This has to change with your assistance.

Providers like the Root Center have the desire to expand into a variety of additional service lines to further support our non-profit mission of treating underserved and marginalized populations more comprehensively. However, we need to see the state make these investments. The opioid litigation proceeds present's an historic opportunity for the state of CT and its citizens battling the disease of addiction. Not just an opportunity to pay current providers more appropriate rates for the costly services rendered compared to Medicaid reimbursement, but rather look at expanded services and create a wholistic system that has flexibility and capacity built into its schematic.

The Root Center would advocate for a more transformative approach with these opioid settlement funds. For instance, providing consistent funding for peer/recovery coaches in every level of care and funding for in-home addiction treatment services which would include therapy, medication management/MAT, and recovery coaches. At present, home-based addiction treatment is not currently covered by Medicaid but we know there is a real need for these alternatives. One size does not fit all.

Other states have already included funding for phone applications, which allows for clients to journal and document their recovery struggles and successes to a program that will offer support/treatment as needed. Connecticut should follow suit and provide access to modern day technology recovery tools as well.

Transportation also remains a barrier and more funding should be allocated to expand the provider network or for funding to allow programs to have their own transportation. For instance, the state should invest in the Mobile Opioid Treatment Provider (OTP) vans which have been approved by the DEA but no state agency has been able to develop the infrastructure to allow for programs to start using them – not to mention any funding opportunities for them.

As new treatment models are developed, the state should be ready to fund these opportunities. The current approach is leaving too many individuals with addiction needs and minimal resources behind. As you move forward, we would urge you to take a more comprehensive look at the opioid treatment and recovery system and ensure that new programs including residential treatment can be started. The opioid crisis has continued to wreak havoc on families and communities, and we should not lose the opportunity to fully take advantage of these funds.

I am available for further discussion and can be emailed at steven.zuckerman@rootcenter.org.

Thank you for your consideration and the focus on this important initiative.